

Fairfax County Youth Survey FAQs



What is the Fairfax County Youth Survey? The Fairfax County Youth Survey is a comprehensive, anonymous, and voluntary survey that examines the risks and protective factors and health behaviors that influence the health and well-being of our county's youth. The survey is administered to Fairfax County Public Schools 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th graders.

The survey focus areas include:

- assets that build resiliency at home, school, and in the community
- essential life skills
- use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD)
- bullying, aggression, and violence
- teen dating abuse
- gang membership
- mental health, such as stress, suicide, and depression
- sexual health (8th, 10th, and 12th grade only)
- nutrition and physical activity

Why do we conduct the Fairfax County Youth Survey? The results provide a snapshot of our youth in Fairfax County but also serve as a barometer of our own effectiveness as a community in fostering healthful choices in our young people. County, school, and community-based organizations rely on the results to assess youth needs and strengths, develop programs, monitor trends, measure countywide outcomes, and guide countywide planning of prevention efforts. The survey is also an important tool for measuring student achievement goals related to essential life skills and responsibility to the community. Most importantly, the survey gives parents, youth, and community members a sense of our challenges and our strengths and how to build upon those strengths.

Are sensitive questions asked on the survey? Some questions may be considered sensitive. They are included in recognition of the importance of these topics and are presented in a straightforward and sensitive manner. If a student is uncomfortable with any question on the survey, he or she does not have to answer that question or may elect to discontinue the survey.

Are the results confidential? Yes. Individually identifying information is not collected from students. All results are presented at a group, or aggregate, level. The survey is not used for any kind of individual diagnostic purpose.

Are individual students tracked over time to see how their behavior changes? No. Surveys are not linked to individual students. Individually identifying information is not collected from students.

Is participation voluntary? Yes. Parents or guardians will receive a letter of notification and an "opt-out" form to complete if they do not want their student to participate. If a parent or guardian elects to opt-out, the student will be assigned an alternative activity. No student will be subjected to unfavorable comments or stigmatization for the decision to abstain from or to participate in the survey. In addition, if a student elects not to participate or complete the survey, he or she will be assigned an alternative activity.

How was the survey developed? Starting in 2009, the Fairfax County Youth Survey was developed collaboratively between Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) and Department of Neighborhood & Community Services (formerly Department of Systems Management for Human Services), building upon earlier survey instruments and taking into account feedback received. Prior to 2009, the survey content was determined by the multidisciplinary Fairfax County

Youth Survey Team, made up of key stakeholders from the community, county agencies, and the school system. The questions currently on the survey were selected from only nationally recognized surveys that follow rigorous testing and validation procedures. This ensures not only that the questions have national comparability but that they do, indeed, measure what they propose to measure.

Is the survey valid and reliable? Yes. To ensure comparability, questions included will be the same as those asked in previous surveys. The survey meets scientific standards of reliability and validity. Mechanisms are incorporated to detect invalid responses to survey questions. The protocols used to assess validity are described in the survey reports (available online at: www.fairfaxcounty.gov/youthsurvey).

Do students answer questions truthfully? Yes. Research has shown that this type of data can be gathered as reliably from adolescents as from adults. Youth are assured that the survey is anonymous and that their responses are not linked to them. Several internal reliability checks help identify falsified answers. Those surveys are removed from the analysis.

Will the survey be administered in any foreign languages? The full survey is currently not administered in any language other than English; however, a shortened version of the survey analyzed by Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is translated into seven languages to allow students with limited English proficiency to provide feedback regarding their experience at school, their sense of safety, and their knowledge of where to turn for help if needed. The translated survey also asks students questions about bullying, sexual harassment, and other forms of harassment or discrimination they may experience. Students may ask teachers for assistance if they are unable to understand a word or question. Teachers are encouraged to use the same reasonable accommodations they use for general classroom testing.

What are assets that build resiliency? One model for fostering resiliency in youth is the Resiliency Wheel developed by Nan Henderson, founder of Resiliency in Action. The wheel identifies six resiliency builders or “external protective factors” that can be provided by schools, families, and communities that mitigate risk factors and build resiliency. Research has shown these six resiliency builders to be effective in helping our youth successfully meet the stress and challenges they face in their lives. The more resiliency builders set in place in a youth’s life, the higher likelihood that youth will respond positively to challenges. Above all else, it is vital that youth have at least one caring, trusted, and supportive adult relationship in building resiliency. To learn more about resiliency builders, visit: <https://www.fcps.edu/resources/student-safety-and-wellness/mental-health-and-resiliency>

What are risk and protective factors? “Protective factors” promote resiliency including the ability to avoid alcohol and other drug abuse and problem behaviors, while “risk factors” help explain circumstances that may increase the likelihood of problem behaviors. Elevated risk factor scores increase the chance that a young person will be vulnerable to alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use, while high protective factor scores increase a young person’s ability to resist drug and other substance use and also indicate positive social skills and stronger family support. Best practice approaches to using protective and risk factors typically encourage the use of both in developing prevention strategies. Focusing on protective factors fosters resiliency in students, views youth as empowered with strengths, rather than confronted by risks, and encourages nurturing youth in order to help them succeed. Further, protective factors typically comprise variables that may be more amenable to programmatic impacts than those that comprise risk factors. Reinforcing protective factor processes can help young people be more resilient when confronting risk factors and risky behaviors.

Why do you ask questions related to sexual health? There are questions that measure the prevalence of sexual activity among survey respondents. These questions will only be asked of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders. By Virginia state law, sixth graders may not be asked about sexual health. This information will provide baseline and continuing information about the sexual health of our youth and will be used to determine the effectiveness of our education and communication. Questions refer to age of first intercourse, number of partners, and use of contraception. The survey allows the examination of the relationships between sexual behavior and substance use, mental health, depression, gang membership, overall risk and protective factors. AIDS, HIV infection, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are major health problems. Teen pregnancy can have significant consequences for individuals, families, and our community, as a whole. The only way to determine if youth are at risk for these outcomes is to ask questions about their behavior.

How is the survey administered? The survey is administered in a classroom setting. It takes one 50-minute class period. The survey is distributed to the students; the students read the instructions and then complete the survey. Once the class is finished, the surveys are placed in a provided return envelope to be packaged with other surveys

from the school to be sent to the contractor for scanning and analysis. No personal or identifying information is requested from the students.